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ABSTRACT

During the last three decades there has been a growing interest among social scientists in studying the attitudes of young people toward the elderly and the aging process. This study explored children's attitudes toward the elderly and aging using interviews and drawings. Third, fifth, and seventh grade students (N=162) were asked to "draw a young person" and to "draw an old person" in addition to completing three subtests of The Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly Scale. Results suggest that children in all grade levels display both positive as well as negative attitudes toward the aged and aging process. Fifty percent or more of each grade level reported old people to be helpful, friendly, wonderful, and good, whereas young people were reported to be just healthy. Overall, 60-70% of each grade level gave a negative response when asked how they feel about getting old. Girls felt more positively than boys. Seventy percent of the children drew a "young person" as the same gender as themselves and an "old person" as the opposite gender as themselves. The body size drawn in inches of an "old person" was significantly smaller than that drawn of the "young person." This study does provide a basis for further research and for the generation of hypotheses concerning children's attitudes toward the aged and the aging process as reflected in their personal drawings. (ABL)

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Using Drawings to Explore Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly

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Running head: CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ELDERLY

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Abstract

Third, fifth, and seventh grade children (n=164) were asked to "draw a young person" and to "draw an old person" in addition to completing three subtests of The Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly Scale. Results suggest that children in all grade levels display both positive as well as negative attitudes toward the aged and aging process. Fifty percent or more of each grade level reported old people to be helpful, friendly, wonderful and good, whereas young people were reported to be just healthy. Overall, 60-70% of each grade level gave a negative response when asked how they feel about getting old. Girls felt more positive than boys. Seventy percent of the children drew the opposite gender for the drawings of the "old person." The body size drawn in inches of an "old person" was significantly smaller than that drawn of the "young person." Implications concerning the use of drawings to study children's attitudes are discussed.

Using Drawings to Explore Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly

"In contemporary American society there seems to exist a general and pervasive negative attitude toward age and the elderly. Overall, the results of studies exploring attitudes toward the old and aging support the idea that being old in the United States is perceived of as less desirable than being young" (Seefeldt & Keawkungwal, 1985, p.226).

Tuckman and Lorge pioneered research on attitudes toward the elderly in the early 1950s by demonstrating that a variety of populations discriminate against the aged. Before 1968, however, research on attitudes toward the elderly did not involve children. The classic study of Hickey, Hickey, and Kalish (1968) launched the exploration of children's attitudes toward old people.

During the last three decades there has been a growing interest among social scientists in studying the attitudes of young people toward the elderly and the aging process. Some of these studies have shown that children's attitudes toward older people are generally negative (Seefeldt, 1984; Downs & Walz, 1981; Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, & Serock, 1977a). Others have shown mixed results (Marks, Newman, & Onawola, 1985; Fillmer, 1984; Nishi-Strattner & Myers, 1983).

The use of drawings and pictures has long been utilized to assess children's attitudes and stereotypes toward racial and ethnic groups (Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, & Serock, 1977b). Human figure drawings have become one of the most widely used techniques of mental health professionals working with children. "It is further maintained that human figure drawings may reveal a child's attitudes toward life's stresses and strains and his way of meeting them; drawings may also reflect strong fears and anxieties which may concern the child, consciously or unconsciously, . . . it is believed that human figure drawings reflect the child's current stage of mental development and his attitude and concerns of the given moment, all of which change in time due to maturation and experience" (Koppitz, 1968, pp.3-4). In short, child's drawings are taken to show something about the sort of information that is represented internally.

Although the research is growing, still lacking is an adequate appraisal of children's attitudes toward the aged and strategies by which such perceptions can be modified. The formation of attitudes that debase old age carries the potential of affecting the way children view the elderly and the way they will view themselves when they are elderly.

The purpose of this study was to explore third, fifth, and seventh grade children's attitudes toward the

elderly and aging using The CATE, a structured interview technique, and their human figure drawings. The questions were: 1. Are there developmental changes related to children's attitudes toward the elderly, as in this case, across the three grade levels? 2. Are there gender differences with respect to attitudes toward the elderly? 3. Overall, do these children possess positive or negative attitudes toward the elderly and aging?

Methods

Subjects

Third, fifth, and seventh grade teachers volunteered their classrooms to participate in the study. The convenience sample consisted of one- hundred and sixty-four (37 third, 76 fifth, and 49 seventh grade) students between the ages of 7 and 14 (83 girls and 79 boys). Permission slips were sent home to all of the parents, and those children who returned signed parental slips participated. The children were primarily white and from middle-class homes from five public schools in Western and Northeastern Connecticut. While IQ information was not available, teachers' judgments suggested that all of the children were of average intelligence. All but two children reported having grandparents and 96 percent reported some contact with grandparents. In addition, twenty-five percent reported having stepgrandparents.

Instruments

The Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly Scale (The CATE) was selected to assess children's attitudes toward the elderly. The following three subtests were used: the open-end word association, the semantic differential, and the picture series. The word association subtest consists of open-ended questions that measure the affective, physical, and behavioral components of children's attitudes toward the elderly. The semantic differential subtest consists of 10 items on a 5 point, bipolar scale, which rate the two concepts YOUNG PEOPLE and OLD PEOPLE. This subtest measures the evaluative dimension of attitudes. The picture series subtest asks children to respond to concrete visual representations of men at age 30, 44, 63, 77.

In addition to the three subtests of The CATE, all children were asked to "draw a young person" and to "draw an old person."

Procedures

All children were interviewed by the investigator during the normal course of a school day. After an introduction by the classroom teacher, it was explained that the interview was not a test but a series of exercises designed to find out "what they think."

The children were given a letter-size (8 1/2" x 11") piece of paper and a pencil with an eraser and asked to

"draw a young person." Upon completion, another piece of paper was given and the children were asked to "draw an old person." The CATE instrument was then administered followed by a recording of demographic information. The demographic information was to be used for descriptive and analytical purposes. Each question was read aloud and the students were given sufficient time to record their responses before reading successive questions. The interview took approximately 40 minutes. After the interview, children were given the opportunity to ask questions, share ideas and display drawings.

Results

The CATE Word Association subtest revealed several significant contrasts between the three grade levels. When asked the question, "What can you tell me about old people?" seventh graders answered with more positive behavioral responses [X^2=7.608, p<.02] than the other two grade levels. Seventh graders were also more acquainted with old people outside of the family [X^2=17.743, p<.001] and were better able to identify proper names for old people [X^2=17.10, p<.002]. Overall, 60-70% of each grade level gave a negative response when asked, "How do you feel about getting old. Girls felt more positive than boys about getting old [X^2=8.66, p<.013].

Ninety-four percent of the children were able to identify the oldest person correctly on The CATE Picture

Series subtest with 96% giving a physical- descriptive reason for their choice. Seventy percent of all children expressed negative feelings when confronted with how they would feel when that old. Fifty percent or more of each grade level chose the picture of the man at age 44 to be the one they preferred to be with [X^2=14.089, p<.02].

On the Semantic Differential subtest, fifty percent or more of each grade level reported old people to be helpful, friendly, wonderful and good, whereas young people were reported to be just healthy. Boys viewed young people as cleaner than old people [X^2=12.88, p<.01] and old people as prettier than young people [X^2=12.18, p<.01].

The following structural features were used to analyze each of the children's drawings: gender of drawing, head size in inches, wrinkles, expression, hair, missing body parts, distorted body parts, posture, body size in inches, placement of drawing on page, setting, action, wheelchair, walker, cane, dentures, hat, t-shirt, skirt, sneakers, glasses, plaid theme, smoking, jewelry, the presence of dark and/or light lines, erasure marks and shading.

Seventy percent of the children drew a "young person" as the same gender as themselves and an "old person" as the opposite gender as themselves [see Figure 1]. An overall significant difference was found in

regard to body size in inches, with the drawing of an "old person" significantly smaller than the drawing of a "young person", t=2.11,p<.03 [see Figure 2]. A significant difference was also found across grade levels with third graders drawing more women for both their drawings than men [X^2=6.695, p<.035]; this phenomenon seemed to decrease with advanced grade level with the following percents: 65%, 50%, 35%.

Seventy percent of all drawings of an "old person" possessed wrinkles, a cane, and short curly hair. Fifty percent possessed glasses [see figures 3 & 4], twenty-five percent facial hair, and ten percent wheelchairs or walkers [see figure 5]. Fifty percent of all drawings of a "young person" were depicted as wearing sneakers and a t-shirt. Twenty percent of all the "old person" drawings had missing body parts as opposed to only 6% of all the "young person" drawings. Surprisingly, both drawings were equal with 20% displaying action in the drawings. A happy expression was depicted on 87% of the drawings of a "young person" and on 67% of the drawings of an "old person" [see figure 6]. Girls portrayed more outdoor [X^2=11.73, p<.003] and action [X^2=10.46, p<.001] oriented drawings than boys.

Discussion

As with previous research published in this area (Seefeldt et al., 1977a; Marks, 1985; Dobrosky et al., 1986), the children in this study expressed a diversity of attitudes toward the young, the elderly and the aging process. Even though all but two children had grandparents and some contact with these grandparents, children seem to have a limited view of old people with the majority conceptualizing old age in terms of physical appearance and problems and behaviors associated with physical appearance.

It appears that, although some aspects of the children's perceptions of the aged and the aging process are negative, their general perceptions of old people are positive. As demonstrated with the results on the semantic differential subtest, old people were reported as being more friendly, wonderful, and good than young people who were reported as only healthy. Again, a purely physical assessment. Children do recognize the negative along with the positive aspects of aging.

The drawings proved most interesting, with 70% of the children drawing the opposite gender for the drawings of the "old person." Perhaps a denial of aging? Also, the smaller size of the drawings of the "old person" depicts possible low self-esteem, confusion and ambiguity of the aging process (Machover, 1949, p.90). Cane size

is also interesting because in more than half the drawings the cane appeared bigger than the old person's body itself.

While these findings are neither startling nor inconsistent with previous research, they are somewhat unique in that they are derived from children's drawings of a "young person" and "old person" to elicit responses. No other stimuli were offered other than the phrases "draw a young person" and "draw an old person"; thus responses do not rest on the questionable assumption that the children were responding to a uniform stimulus. "Much prior research has been non-comparable due to the variety of stimuli employed in research designs. In addition, some studies have inadvertently introduced biasing stimuli that limit the range of responses which might otherwise be used by research subjects" (Dobrosky & Bishop, 1986, p.438). This method allows an identification of cognitive categories that children employ when thinking about people they consider to be old.

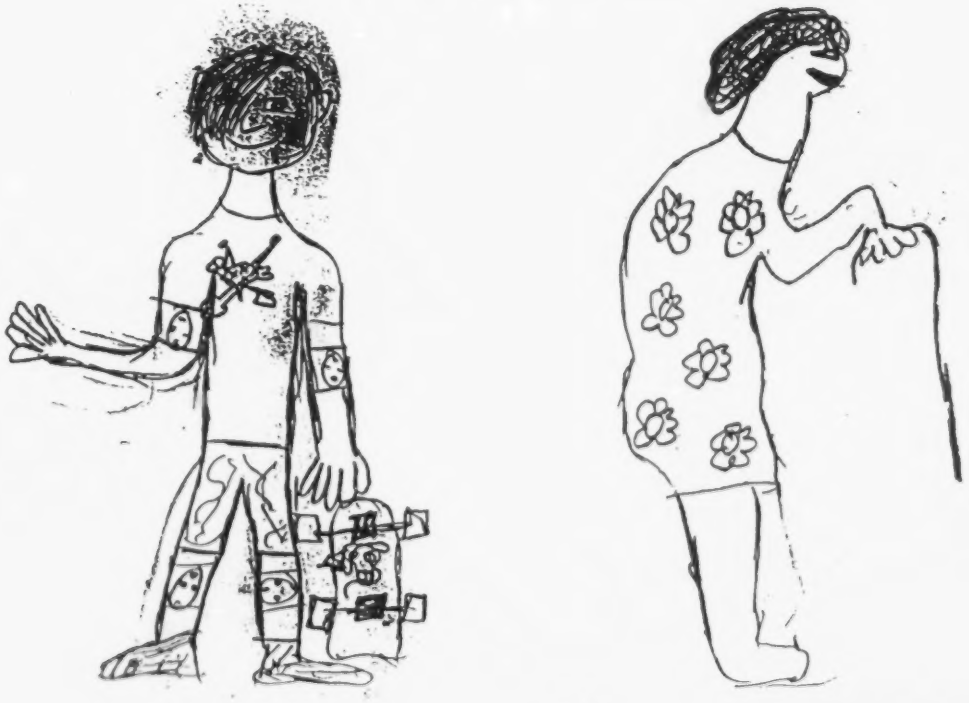
This study does provide a basis for further research and for the generation of hypotheses concerning children's attitudes toward the aged and the aging process as reflected in their personal drawings. What children draw is what they can see. Children along with the rest of society have to remember not to judge a book

by its cover, in this case the elderly by their cover, their physical appearance. Inside exists a very different but very similar world. With our help the topic "growing old" can be positively conveyed intergenerationally [see figure 7].

Figure 1:

OPPOSITE SEX

GIRL 5th Grade



BOY 7th Grade

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Figure 2:

AMBIVALENCE & CONFUSION
BODY SIZE

BOY 3rd Grade

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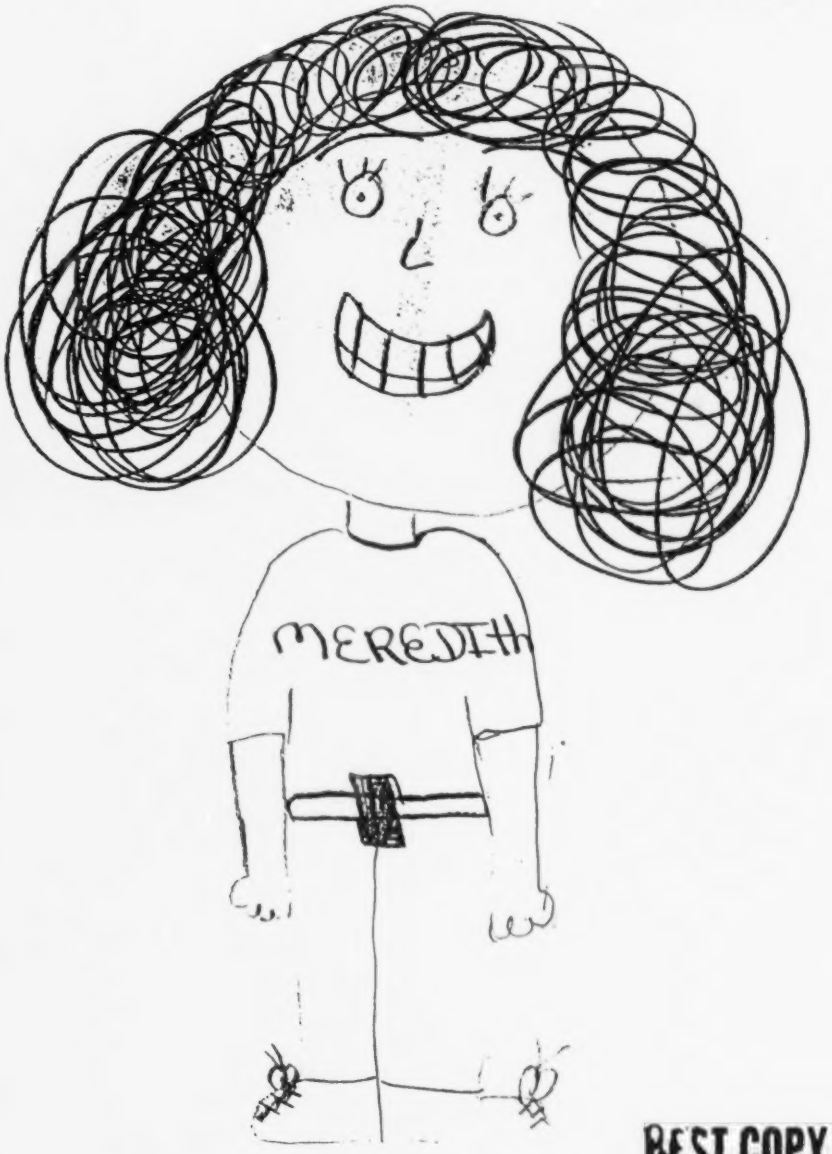
Figure 3:

WRINKLES

GIRL 3rd Grade



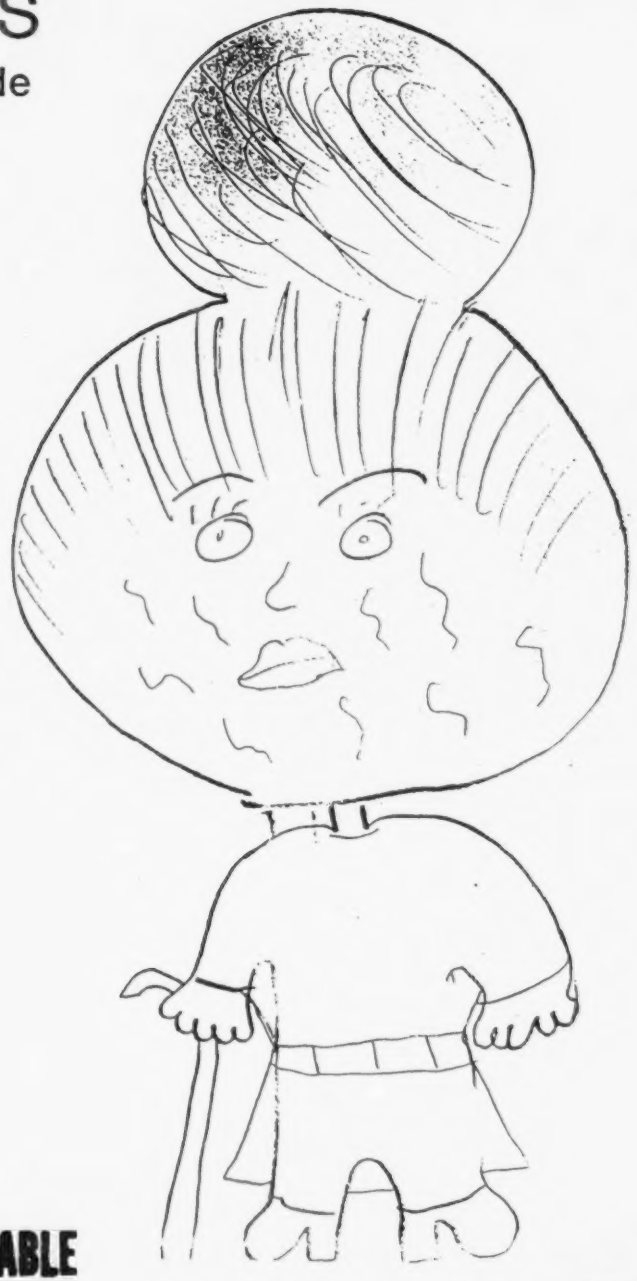


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Figure 4:

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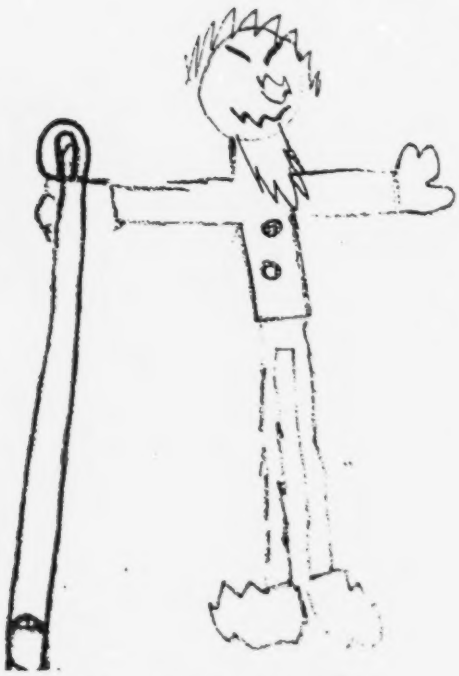
CANE SIZE



GIRL 3rd Grade

GIRL 5th Grade

GIRL 3rd Grade

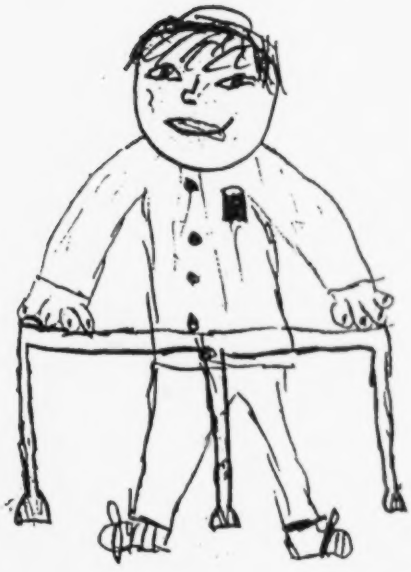
BOY 7th Grade

Figure 5:

WHEELCHAIRS & WALKERS

BOY 7th Grade

GIRL 3rd Grade



BOY 7th Grade

BOY 7th Grade

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Figure 6:

EXPRESSION

GIRL 3rd Grade

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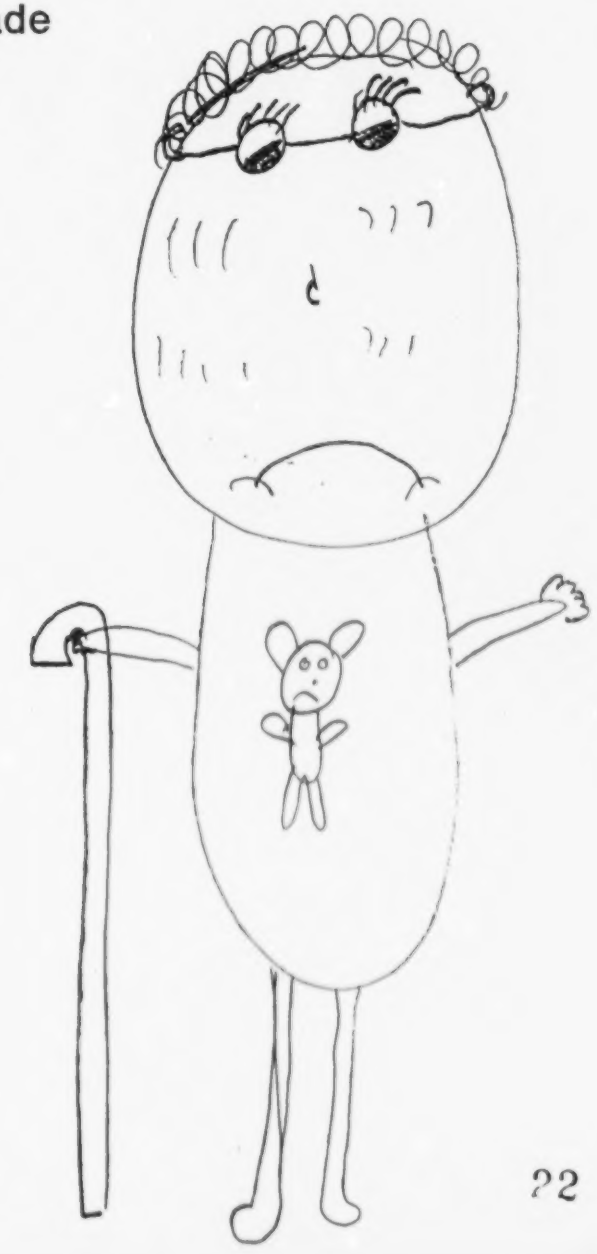

Figure 7:

END ON A POSITIVE NOTE

BOY 5th Grade

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Author Notes

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